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Drug-Resistant Strains of HIV Are Spreading

By Mark Schoofs

Staff Reporter of The Wall Street Journal

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CHICAGO -- More drug-resistant strains of HIV, the AIDS virus, are being spread from person to person, researchers reported yesterday at a major AIDS conference being held here. The disturbing study also showed that people who contract drug-resistant HIV fare worse on therapy.

The nine-city study took blood from 394 patients who had recently gotten HIV. Scientists then tested how resistant the virus was to drugs.

From 1995 to 1998, only 3.5% of patients contracted a strain that was highly resistant to one or more drugs. But 14% of patients infected in 1999 and 2000 had drug-resistant strains.

Even more alarming, strains of HIV that were resistant to multiple classes of drugs rose at an even higher rate. For patients infected between 1995 and 1998, only 0.4% had multi-drug-resistant strains, but that percentage soared to 5.8% of patients who contracted HIV in 1999 and 2000.

A major goal of AIDS therapy is to suppress the amount of virus in the blood to undetectable levels. But when patients with drug-resistant HIV went on treatment, "the drugs suppressed their virus less, and took longer to do so," said Susan Little, a San Diego researcher who led the study.

Patients who start out with multi-drug-resistant HIV can be trapped with few options for treatment. The study, said researchers, highlights the importance of developing drugs that target resistant virus, not just "me-too" drugs, and medicines that work in entirely new ways.

Also at the conference, researchers from Emory University in Atlanta followed 104 new AIDS patients eligible for care at a public AIDS clinic in Atlanta. Even though these patients had very advanced AIDS, more than half never showed up at the clinic. An additional 20% dropped out of care within a year. Only slightly more than a tenth were able to obtain fully effective therapy after one year.

Carlos Del Rio, the study's lead investigator, said that drug use, particularly of crack cocaine, homelessness and mental illness made it very difficult for these patients to get optimal care.

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